

Australian Natural History Medallion 2008

Ernest Edward Perkins

The recipient of the 2008 Australian Natural History Medallion is Ern Perkins, who was nominated by the Field Naturalists' Club of Ballarat for his work in the research and recording of native flora and fauna. This work has led to his extensive contribution to environmental education in the community. His dedicated investigation, exploration, recording, documenting and advocacy of our natural environment has been of such benefit that he greatly deserves the award.

The Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club supported the nomination and provided an update to the original submission of Ern's achievements in 2007 and early 2008.

One of the hallmarks of Ern Perkins' natural history contribution has been his initiation of, involvement in, and leadership of surveys of local flora and fauna. Personal experience includes the Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater surveys and ongoing contributions to the New Atlas of Australian Birds. With groups he has coordinated projects on the conservation value of roadside reserves, first in the Shire of Maldon and later on in the Shires of Metcalfe and Newstead and the City of Castlemaine. He recorded plant lists for the Eltham Copper Butterfly colony at Castlemaine Botanic Gardens and conducted plant surveys for the Diggings National Heritage Park on behalf of Parks Victoria. Records of the birds and plants located by the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, the natural history along Shire walks and the indigenous plants of Castlemaine District are all maintained by Ern in databases that he has developed.

Ern was a member of the publishing committee, and a contributor for both editions of *Indigenous Plants of Greater Bendigo* published by the Bendigo Native Plant Group (the local Australian Plants Society group) and the City of Greater Bendigo. Most of the leaflets on the natural history of the Castlemaine area, published by its field naturalist club, have been prepared by Ern. Regular updates and reprinting

are undertaken. Topics include acacias, eucalypts, mistletoes, native grasses, orchids, ferns, rare plants and weeds. Birds and local geological features are also covered.

Ern has totalled nearly 90 years of membership with field naturalist clubs (FNCV, Benalla, Bendigo, Castlemaine and Ringwood); still current are those with Castlemaine from its inception in 1976, and the FNCV since 1965. Simultaneously, he has spent nearly 80 years in total with the Australian Plants Society and the Bendigo Native Plant Group. The Australian Plants Society (Victoria) elected him as an Honorary Life Member in 2000. With many of these memberships came office bearer positions: president, treasurer, newsletter editor, membership officer and webmaster.

With his fund of local knowledge it is not surprising that Ern has been asked to participate on advisory boards and committees of management, for the Kaweka Wildflower Reserve, the Mt Alexander Shire Walk and Trails Advisory Board and that Shire's Council Heritage Advisory Board. With his wife Lesley he has taken part in the Botanical Guardians Scheme; activities have included botanical surveys of bushland blocks, the cemeteries of north-central Victoria, and populations of threatened plant species.

Like most well-respected local naturalists, Ern has been called upon often to provide lectures and talks, not only to naturalist, plant and Landcare groups but in other more diverse settings. He has led innumerable walks and excursions for groups and for the Shire, thus helping to spread the conservation message. On a more personal level, he helps individuals with plant identification, particularly for Landcare surveys.

Not only has Ern used his specialist skills of plant identification and selection of plants for regeneration projects with Castlemaine Urban Landcare and the Eltham Copper Butterfly colony in the Castlemaine Botanic Gardens, but he has also removed tens of thousands of weeds over many years.

Ern has been involved closely with two major projects in the Castlemaine area. Since 2005 he has undertaken plant identifications, photography and data collation in an ongoing project in which paired quadrats are used to monitor the effects of control burning. Ern also played a major role in the photography and recording of geo-referenced localities. Castlemaine Historical Society holds this large set of photographs in its archives. The intent is that these photographs will be used to document changes in the flora and landscape of the local district. Future photographs from the same photopoints will be used to assess the effect of prolonged drought on the bushland.

Ern has always worked closely with Lesley, and in 2006 they received a Banksia Environmental Award entitled 'Back from the Brink: Saving Victoria's Threatened Orchids'. As joint

research officer with his wife for the Australian Plants Society, he contributes a regular column for its quarterly magazine. In 2000 he was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for services to conservation and the environment and the community of Castlemaine.

In these days of increased specialisation, even by the field naturalist, it is a pleasure to hear of Ern Perkins' diverse range of interests—botany, ecology, geology, ornithology and conservation—and to see them put into practice, encouraging the community to provide the basic data on which future research and management should be based.

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continued from page 43

Darwin and Lyell at once saw that the essay, if published, would anticipate the former's work, and, on Dr. Hooker being consulted, it was decided to make an abstract of Darwin's work and his essay as a joint communication to the society. Dr. Wallace alluded to the very different way in which he had dealt with his ideas to that of Darwin. The idea had come to him in a sudden flash of insight, thought out in a few hours, written down with such illustrations and developments as occurred to him at the moment, copied on thin letter-paper and sent off to Darwin, all within one week. He therefore contended that Darwin should ever be recognized as the sole and undisputed discoverer and patient investigator of the great law of "natural selection" in all its far-reaching consequences. Then he went on to consider why, of all the great men who had given attention to the question, he and Darwin had alone hit upon a solution which seemed to be a satisfying one to a large number of able men to-day, and attributed it to the fact that both he and Darwin had been ardent beetle-hunters, and the constant comparison of specimens for new species and varieties had so trained them to observe slight peculiarities of habits, & c., and both being of a speculative turn of mind, they were constantly led to think upon the "why" and the "how" of all the wonderful variety of nature. Finally, he said, when their minds were well stored with the results of personal observation their attention had been directed to theories set forth by Malthus in his "Principles of Population", and though Darwin read the book two years after his return from his celebrated voyage, and he had read it before he went abroad, that influence, combined with their experience as collectors, doubtless led to practically the same conclusion, and he thought that possibly Darwin's precursors in the same line of investigation had failed through lacking that special turn of mind that makes the collector and the species-man. He concluded by saying that he had long since come to see "that no one deserves either praise or blame for the *ideas* that come to him, but only for the *actions* resulting therefrom. . . ."

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